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Published in:
Australasian Dispute Resolution Journal

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Recommended citation(APA):
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11-1-2008

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**Accepted for publication in the
Australasian Journal of Dispute Resolution
May 2008-
Revised August 2008**

What Video Games Teach About Conflict

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What Video Games Teach About Conflict

Abstract

Currently we face the problem of teaching children to be peacemakers in a world where popular video games available to children frequently model violent patterns of conflict resolution. Although video games can provide intense enjoyment for players, criticism of the long - term effects of exposure to models of violent reaction to conflict needs to be addressed and efforts made to provide alternative models which demonstrate that solving conflict involves learning how to see a situation from someone else's viewpoint, clear articulation of one's own position and the ability to perceive another's, together with the mental flexibility to imagine proposals that might meet the needs of everyone involved. This paper analyses plot summaries and genres of current popular video games to discern those in which explicit violence towards others in conflict situations is modelled and those in which efforts are made to teach peaceful ways to solve conflict.

Teaching children to be peacemakers is difficult in a world where popular video games frequently expose players to violent ways of resolving conflict. Once purchased games may not be restricted to the age groups for which they are recommended. In the far-reaching life of a videogame children may play games intended only for adults that are given to them by friends or shared at their friends' houses.'

Finding an exact cause-effect relationship between watching violence and violent behaviour is difficult because complex actions like violent behaviour and language are multi-determined. It is true that millions of people play violent video games without noticeable effects. However, people with violent tendencies or those whose life experiences resonate with the themes of video violence are predicted to be more vulnerable to the effects of violence¹.

This paper analyses the psychological effects of exposure to violent media and examines the attractions of and satisfactions gained from playing video games. It describes major game genres and the content of key popular games in order to analyse them in relation to the findings of psychological research on the effects of violent media, the attractions of video games to players and the likely transfer of skills gained in the video game environment to real world settings. In addition the content of eight games designed to teach alternative ways of dealing with conflict is described.

Psychological Effects of Media Violence

The American Psychological Association (APA) in 2005 called for a reduction of violence in video games and interactive media used by children and adolescents because it argued that research showed that playing violent video games increases aggressive behaviour and decreases helpful behaviour and because in violent media

¹ Anderson C A, and Bushman BJ, Effects of violent video games on aggressive behaviour, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, physiological arousal, and prosocial behaviour: A meta-analytic review of the scientific literature" (2001) 12 (5), *Psychological Science*, 353 – 359.

“perpetrators go unpunished in 73% of all violent scenes and therefore teach that violence is an effective means of resolving conflict”². In addition, because video games players identified with violent characters and became actively engaged in repeated violent actions they were more likely to transfer violent attitudes to behaviour in real life situations than when watching violence on TV.

In a meta-analysis of the literature on this topic Anderson & Bushman found that despite the existence of “numerous educational, nonviolent strategy, and sports games ... the most heavily marketed and consumed games are violent”³. Their General Aggression Model (GAM)⁴ posits that aggression is linked not only to frustrating social situations, an aggressive personality and contact with aggressive peers, but also to repeated violent game-playing involving learning, rehearsal and reinforcement of aggression and the development of aggressive beliefs and attitudes leading to desensitisation about aggression. Anderson & Bushman found that the predictions of GAM were supported by their meta-analysis of video games studies in that exposure to violent video games was “positively associated with heightened levels of aggression in young adults and children” and “negatively associated with prosocial behaviour”⁵. In a six month study of 430 children aged 8-10 years Gentile, Saleem and Anderson⁶ reported that children who played violent video games became more aggressive over time.

From another view Goldstein⁷ argued that researchers often fail to distinguish between aggressive play and aggressive behaviour and children can distinguish the

² Retrieved on 7 August 2007 from www.apa.org/releases/resolutiononvideoviolence.pdf at ¶ 4

³ Anderson and Bushman, n 1 at 354.

⁴ Anderson C A and Bushman BJ, “Human Aggression” (2002) 53 *Annual Review of Psychology*, (27-51).

⁵ Anderson and Bushman, n 1 at 356

⁶ Gentile DA, Saleem M. and Anderson C (2007) “Public policy and the effects of media violence on children” 1 (1) *Social Issues and Policy Review* pp15-61.

⁷ Goldstein J, (1998). “Immortal Kombat: War toys and violent video games”. In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Why we watch: The attractions of violent entertainment*. (pp. 53-68). New York: Oxford University Press. p.55

difference. However, Anderson labelled this claim “Myth 4 : field experiments are irrelevant (aggression measures based either on direct imitation of video game behaviours (e.g., karate kicks) or are normal play behaviours” and presented a rebuttal “Fact: some field experiments have used behaviours such as biting, pinching, hitting, pushing, and pulling hair, behaviors that were not modelled in the game. The fact that these aggressive behaviours occur in natural environments does not make them “normal” play behaviour, but it does increase the face validity, (and some would argue the external validity) of the measures”⁸. Also relevant is Anderson’s “Myth 6: there are no studies linking violent video gameplay to serious aggression” to which his reply is “Facts: High levels of violent video game exposure have been linked to delinquency, fighting at school and during free play periods, and violent criminal behavior (e.g., self-reported assault, robbery)”⁹.

Anderson claimed that psychologists see violent media as harmful because repeated media violence exposure increases aggression through creating more positive attitudes, beliefs, and expectations regarding the use of aggressive solutions, through creating and making aggressive behavioural scripts more cognitively accessible and decreasing “the normal negative emotional reactions to conflict, aggression, and violence”¹⁰.

Why Play Violent Video Games?

Despite the fears of psychologists about the long-term effects of exposure to violence and violent solutions to conflict, millions of people of all ages play video games. After examining attractions of violent entertainment Goldstein¹¹ concluded

⁸ Anderson C, “Violent video games: Myths, facts and unanswered questions” (2003) 16 (5) *Psychological Science Agenda* American Psychological Association. (Retrieved May 2, 2007 from www.apa.org/science/psa/sb-anderson.html) at ¶7

⁹ Anderson, n 12 at ¶9

¹⁰ Anderson, n 12 at ¶17

¹¹ Goldstein J. “Why we watch”. (1998). In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Why we watch: The attractions of violent entertainment*. (pp.212-226). New York: Oxford University Press.

that people sought it for a range of motives: excitement, companionship, social acceptance through shared experience, and even a wish to see justice enacted. He found that violent entertainment attracted participants because it allowed them to become totally immersed in an imaginary activity. He linked “immersion in a fantasy world” with Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of “flow” which has been described as

Being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away.

Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost¹².

In a similar vein the XEO Design team found that their subjects played games for “the adrenaline rush, a vicarious adventure, a mental challenge” or “a moment of solitude or the company of friends”¹³.

Goldstein considered that in seeking sensation and excitement and in exploring taboo subjects and settings some individuals “learn to manage anxiety and defeat fear by distorting and exaggerating reality ... and bond with others, storytellers and peers by sharing intense emotional experiences”¹⁴.

Violence can evoke “grief, disgust or elation” depending on the sense of control experienced by the player; control over not only what appears on the screen, but also “what effects it will have on them”¹⁵. In Goldstein’s view to experience pleasure “from exposure to violent or threatening images, the audience must feel relatively safe and secure in their surroundings” and must see that the images are produced for entertainment, rather than seeing them as realistic violence. Identifying characters as

¹² Geirland J, (1996). “Go with the flow”. *Wired*. (Retrieved September 27, 2007 from <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.09/czik.html>) at ¶3

¹³ Lazzaro N, “Why we play games; Four keys to more emotion without story” (2004. (Retrieved September 25, 2007 from www.xeodesign.com/xeodesign_whyweplaygames.pdf) at p.1

¹⁴ Goldstein J n 11 at 218.

¹⁵ Goldstein J n.11 at 218

evil makes violence against them “seem justified and hence enjoyable” and the protective frame of unreality makes violent imagery “exciting rather than anxiety provoking”¹⁶.

Cantor found that “anxiety reducing, justice-restoring genres ... attract anxious, more empathic children who side emotionally with the ‘good guy’ over the ‘bad guy’” and use the programs to control their anxieties¹⁷. However, Cantor also found children who were exposed to violence in their real lives were more likely to seek and enjoy very violent entertainment which did not involve moral considerations or require them to side with “the good guy”.

The “catharsis” view of the playing of aggressive video games is that they could assist in “purging” aggressive feelings, leading to less violent activity. However, Goldstein found no evidence in research by Cantor¹⁸, McCauley¹⁹ and Zillmann²⁰ that violent entertainment did this.

In a UNESCO study of media content in which 5,000 children were surveyed Groebel²¹ found that 51% of children in high-aggression environments compared with 37% of children in low aggression environments wanted to be like the Arnold Schwarzenegger character *The Terminator*. Groebel thought that it was perhaps because “he seems to represent the characteristics which children think are necessary to cope with difficult situations”²² and the more aggressive their situations the more of them wanted to be like him.

¹⁶ Goldstein J n11 at 220

¹⁷ Cantor J, “Children’s attraction to violent television programming” (1998). In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Why we watch: The attractions of violent entertainment*. (pp. 88-115). New York: Oxford University Press. At p.113

¹⁸ Cantor, J n 21

¹⁹ McCauley J, “When screen violence is not attractive” (1998). In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Why we watch: The attractions of violent entertainment* (pp. 144-162). New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁰ Zillmann D, “The psychology of the appeal of portrayals of violence” (1998). In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Why we watch: The attractions of violent entertainment*. (pp. 179-211). New York: Oxford University Press.

²¹ Groebel, J. (1999). *The UNESCO Global study on media violence*. (Retrieved September 27, 2007 from <http://www.unesco.cl/pdf/actyeven/ppe/boletin/artingle/49-1.pdf>)

²² Groebel, n 25 at 15.

Groebele's study showed that aggression is interpreted as "a good problem-solver for a variety of situations"²³ and that aggression was more often rewarded and promoted than "nonaggressive ways of coping with one's life"²⁴.

Options Provided by Games

Individuals bring to game-playing their own rules, history, values and social frameworks which interact with the game in individual and group environments against the backdrop of what is occurring in the larger society. As Bruckman and Resnick²⁵ point out in relation to virtual reality projects, games present a limited view of the world – that of the artists, programmers, engineers and designers who construct them. Collaboration, cooperation and the importance of meeting the needs of all participants in the conflict would need to be programmed as options for action in order for those ways of thinking to become part of the players' resources or social capital.

In this context Goldstein reflects that the image makers have a responsibility "to put violence in perspective, to emphasize, as they do, the unacceptability of random, arbitrary, anarchistic, and plain sadistic violence and to portray violence that ultimately serves Justice and the good of humanity"²⁶

Anderson does not agree with the "as they do" part of the above quotation as he says, "Recent video games reward players for killing innocent bystanders, police, and prostitutes, using a wide range of weapons, including guns, knives, flame throwers, swords, baseball bats, cars, hands, and feet In some, the player assumes the role of hero, whereas in others the player is a criminal"²⁷.

²³ Groebele, n 25 at 13

²⁴ Groebele, n 25 at 13,

²⁵ Bruckman, A., & Resnick, M. (1995). The mediaMOO project: Constructionism and professional community. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 1, 94-109.

²⁶ Goldstein, n 11 at 225.

²⁷ Anderson, n 12 at ¶2.

However, Anderson and Bushman (2001) acknowledge that video games could be a force for good “to teach and reinforce non-violent solutions to social conflicts”²⁸. To investigate this possibility a search was made for existing games designed to teach peaceful conflict resolution strategies. They are described later in the paper.

Transfer of Training

Solving conflict involves requires clear articulation of one’s own position and an ability to perceive another’s, together with the mental flexibility to imagine proposals that might meet the needs of everyone involved. Also required is an ability to identify stereotypes and avoid prejudice and discrimination. Those skilled in solving conflicts have strategies for enhancing face saving, face giving and face restoration. Those who, like Anderson and Bushman²⁹ and Groebel³⁰, see that popular entertainment offers few characters who model such behaviours and see instead that violent anti-social behaviour is rewarded, call for a more socially responsible approach to the provision of entertainment accessible by our youth.

Squires claims that “the pedagogical potential of games and social contexts of gaming have been woefully unexamined”³¹ despite opportunities games have provided over more than a decade to design cities (SimCity), run an entire civilization (Civilization series) or relive historical periods (Age of Empires 1 and II).

Squires questioned whether playing games like SimCity taught players anything about systems theory or urban planning principles. He saw the need to embed cooperative and collaborative learning activities in gameplay. Squires questioned the assumption that skills and strategies learned in a game or simulation will transfer to the physical and social complexities of the actual world. Just as learning Latin did not

²⁸ Anderson and Bushman n 1 at 359.

²⁹ Anderson and Bushman, n 1.

³⁰ Groebel, n 25.

³¹ Squires K “Cultural faming of computer/video games” (2002) 2 (1) Game Studies, (Retrieved September 23, 2007 from <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/squire/>). At ¶ 9.

“train the mind” for unrelated skills, so game-playing is unlikely to increase “critical thinking or problem-solving skills” in unrelated contexts which “demand very different social practices”³². Squires might bring the same scepticism to bear on claims that games can be used to teach skills of peaceful negotiation of conflict.

Video games can be used by different actors for different purposes. For example, a flight simulator might be used to have fun, to pass the time, to challenge, to compete with others, to train pilots, or to train terrorists. Similarly an adolescent from a stable supportive family might play a violent video game to amuse him or herself in an exciting yet safe environment in which he or she is in control, whereas another might be gaining justification for anti-social behaviour as an extension of the mores, morals and values sanctioned by his or her usual environment.

Method

Some video games have been popular for years. However, although video gaming is claimed to be only four decades old³³ some older games are tied to obsolete hardware and are not now widely known or played. Accordingly it was decided to concentrate in this study on currently available popular games.

In December 2006 Orlando from video gaming magazine Next Generation (Next-Gen)³⁴ assembled a list of the Top 50 games of the year and listed them under the genre headings and their ranking. Genres are important in considering the APA’s 2005 previously quoted statement that videogames allowed more active participation in violent acts than did media that was watched passively. The following descriptions of Orlando’s list of genres allow us to understand what is meant by “active

³² Squires, n 35 at ¶25.

³³ (Retrieved 30 April 30, 2007 from <http://www.lup.com/do/feature?cId=3116290>).

³⁴ Orlando, G. “Next-Gen’s top 50 games of the year”. (2006, 14 December). (Retrieved August 2, 2007 from http://www.next-gen.biz/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4400&Itemid=2)

participation” . (For a more detailed description of genres see

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game_genres Retrieved August 7, 2007).

Throughout this paper Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, is used as a source of descriptions of videogame content because it provides a comparison source, policed by game players, to the descriptions provided by games’ publishers.

Genres of Next-Gen’s Top 50 games of the Year.

Third-Person Action, Shooter: The player is the character handling a weapon or launching a projectile and thus sees the direct impact of his or her actions.

First-Person Shooter: The player sees the character’s point of view. The player is the character handling a weapon or launching a projectile and the player sees the effect of his or her actions directly.

Third Person Action, Adventure: The onscreen character is seen at a distance from a number of different possible angles Gives players more awareness of their surroundings.

Third Person Action, “Sandbox”: “a video game with an open-ended and non-linear style of gameplay, ...played in a goal-directed manner.... As with a physical sandbox, users can do what they wish with the available game elements and within the limitations of the game engine”³⁵.

Platformer: The game consists of figures jumping between platforms.

RTS: Real Time Strategy games involve resource gathering, base building technology development and direct control over individual units.

RPG: Role Playing Games “developed out of interactive and collaborative storytelling paper and pencil games in which imagined characters and settings were

³⁵ (Retrieved September 28, 2007 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandbox_%28video_games%29).

developed according to rules and guidelines sometimes devised by a Gamemaster
Role-playing games encourage interactivity, imagination and creativity”³⁶

Team Sports: At times the strategy and tactics of the game are emphasised and at others actual physical skills and reflexes are required.

Individual Sports. These games encourage competitiveness, strategy and imagination and in Wii games use hand held controls in such a way that some players develop physical aches and pains from playing.

Orlando’s final category , Miscellaneous, included the following games and their categories Guitar Hero II (Music/Rhythm);. Brain Training; Burnout Revenge (Racing); Microsoft Flight Simulator X (Simulation);. Galactic Civilizations; II: Dread Lords (Turn-Based Strategy).

Orlando’s list of fifty games shows the variety of genres currently available but it is based on subjective judgements or specialist knowledge of Orlando and the *Next-Generation* staff and is not a measure of game usage. An additional factor is that many popular games continue to be played for years or until the hardware used in their playing has become obsolete and is no longer available for purchase. Choosing to own one platform over another can limit access to games not able to be played on it. Taking the above factors into consideration the following list was selected because it represented not only games available for purchase but also games about which material available on the internet was being currently accessed. These games can be said to be popular in 2006 although they may not have been purchased originally in 2006.

LYCOS³⁷ listed the ten top most searched video games in the Thanksgiving holiday period in the United States in 2006 based on analysis of internet searches as:

³⁶ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Role-playing_game Retrieved August 7, 2007).

³⁷ (www.lycos.com , Retrieved August 7, 2007).

1. RuneScape.
2. Naruto
3. Grand Theft Auto Vice City
4. WWE Smackdown
5. EverQuest
6. Gundam
7. World of Warcraft
8. Kingdom Hearts2
9. Halo 2
10. Mortal Kombat

Each title on this list is categorized by genre (as per Orlando's list above) and briefly described. It can be seen that some level of violence and use of weaponry is offered as a solution to conflict in most games.

RuneScape. This game's website reported on 8th August 2007 that there were 118,398 people currently playing³⁸ RuneScape is "a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG)" that provides a virtual world "with monsters to kill, quests to complete and treasures to win". Players control and train characters to become more powerful or more skilled, or to become artisans or traders of weapons in Runescape's markets. The website claims that "Quests and mini games within RuneScape promote problem-solving skills and team work" along with knowledge and perseverance.

Naruto takes the form of an animated Japanese comic. "The main story follows Naruto and his friends' personal growth and development as Ninja ... specially

³⁸ (<http://www.runescape.com/> retrieved August 8, 2007).

trained in the art and science of assassination, espionage, guerilla warfare, covert killing and combative martial art”³⁹.

Grand Theft Auto Vice City (a Third Person Sandbox game) is the fourth video in the Grand Theft auto series. In July 2006 Vice City was, in the American market, “the best-selling PlayStation 2 game of all time” and was similarly popular in Japan⁴⁰.

Vice City is based on Miami, Florida in 1986. The player takes the role of Mafia figure Tommy Vercetti whose task is to supervise an important drug deal. This deal is ambushed by masked gunmen who kill three of Vercetti’s team and steal both the cocaine and the money. Wikipedia reports:

players can steal vehicles, (cars, boats, motorcycles, and even helicopters) partake in drive-by shootings, robberies, and generally create chaos. However, doing so generally attracts unwanted and potentially fatal attention from the police (or, in extreme cases, the FBI, and even the National Guard).

WWE Smackdown. Twenty-six million units of this series of realistic wrestling simulation games have been sold. The 2007 version is more interactive and includes fighting within the crowd ⁴¹.

EverQuest. A massively multiplayer online fantasy role-playing game (MMORPG) in which thousands of players “explore realms of adventure fantasy and magic, slay dragons, seek treasures and explore vast dungeons” online⁴². The game includes a complicated fantasy history involving numbers of unnatural disasters and past wars and battles. Characters from hierarchies of good and evil races and classes fight to dominate others.

³⁹ (Retrieved August 8, 2007 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naruto>).

⁴⁰ (Retrieved August 9, 2007 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Theft_Auto:_Vice_City)

⁴¹ (Retrieved August 9, 2007 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WWE_SmackDown!_\(video_game_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WWE_SmackDown!_(video_game_series)))

⁴² (Retrieved August 9, 2007 from <http://everquest2.station.sony.com/>)

Gundam. According to Wikipedia this series “pioneered the real Robot genre”.

The main theme of the Gundam series is

the harsh depiction of the atrocities of war.... The narrative revolves around the emotions of the characters ...thrown into conflict ...and faced with the death, destruction and dehumanisation inherent to war There are frequent explorations of the nature and meaning of war, the ideal of pacifism and the continuing evolution ... of humanity ⁴³ .

World of Warcraft is a pay-to-play massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) played by nine million players worldwide.

As with other MMORPGs, such as EverQuest, players control a character avatar exploring the landscape, fighting monsters, and performing quests on behalf of computer-controlled characters. The game rewards success through money, items, and experience, which in turn allow players to improve in skill and power⁴⁴.

Plagues such Corrupted Blood, and invasions serve to disrupt play. Players can play against the environment, other players, or role play against the server. The game offers some opportunities for collaboration with others to wage war more effectively and the game gives instructions about how to gain allies by saving other players from attacking monsters although it cautions against doing this too often⁴⁵. In response to tips on how to help others, one player responded on the same page with warnings about appearing weak in case the party you were helping saw the opportunity for “an easy kill” and advised getting healed quickly “so as not to give them that opportunity, and if they try it anyway, be swift and merciless against their attack and make sure they're sorry for being so ungrateful!” It is war after all.

⁴³ (Retrieved August 9, 2007 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gundam>).

⁴⁴ (Retrieved August 9, 2007 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_of_Warcraft

⁴⁵ (How to be nice Retrieved February 13, 2008 from <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/basics/benice.html>)

Kingdom Hearts II. This action role-playing game can be played by everyone aged over ten, and that the game has mild blood, use of alcohol and violence⁴⁶. Kingdom Hearts II was the second best-selling game of 2006 selling 3.5 million copies⁴⁷ and is set in worlds primarily derived from Disney films such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*, and *The Lion King*. There are monsters, villains and challenges to overcome and troubles to resolve.

Halo 2: Halo 2 is a story driven, science fiction, first person perspective action shooter game in which “humans who have developed faster-than-light travel and colonised hundreds of worlds have been engaged in a war” against the Covenant – a collective of genocidal alien races. “Halo 2 features more than 14 human and alien weapons... The game sold 2.4 million copies and earned US\$125 million in its first 24 hours on shelves”⁴⁸.

Mortal Kombat is a fighting role-playing game using an eight-way joystick and five buttons to create punches and kicks. The game’s characters are mostly male. Backgrounds suggest a magical past peopled with absolute rulers and their warriors. When it was introduced in 1992 the level of explicit violence and copious amounts of blood concerned parents who contacted Senators Joe Lieberman and Herb Kohl who publicly denounced Mortal Kombat’s use of violence. Following this the Electronic Software Ratings Board was formed to enable parents in the United States to monitor the content of games⁴⁹.

Creating peaceful solutions through video games

As a comparison to these popular games, most of which utilise violent solutions to conflict, the following games designed to teach conflict skills and problem solving

⁴⁶ (Retrieved August 9, 2007 from <http://na.square-enix.com/games/kingdomhearts/kh2/>).

⁴⁷ (Retrieved August 9, 2007 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_Hearts_II).

⁴⁸ (Retrieved August 9, 2007 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo_2).

⁴⁹ (Retrieved August 7, 2007 from http://www.g4tv.com/gamemakers/episodes/3446/Mortal_Kombat.html).

skills in cooperative environments are described. These games represent an attempt to bring the teaching of conflict resolution or social skills to a medium which is increasingly popular among people of all ages.

In 2005 *Washington Post* journalist Musgrove⁵⁰ described three attempts to link peace-making with video games by moving from fantasy into serious social issues. As both game quality and content combine to make games appealing, alternative games would need to be well constructed and have absorbing content to attract players.

In 2006 *Time* magazine's Batchelder in an article called *Do-Gooder Games*⁵¹ mentioned the following eight games and claimed "techno do-gooders are proliferating and gamers are saving the world".

Food Force: "The U.N.'s aid-relief game ... (with more than 4 million downloads in 15 months).

Darfur Is Dying : more than 800,000 players in four months⁵²

Squeezed: (a planned game) by mtvu.com about the plight of fruit-picking migrant farm workers.

Peacemaker: "creates a stable resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict"⁵³

A Force More Powerful: where players are the chief strategists of non-violent movements⁵⁴. "Featuring ten scenarios inspired by history, A Force More Powerful simulates nonviolent struggles to win freedom and secure human rights against dictators, occupiers, colonizers, and corrupt regimes, as well as campaigns for

⁵⁰ Musgrove, M., (16 October, 2005). Video game world gives peace a chance. *Washington Post*, p. F01. (Retrieved 26 September, 2007. From <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/15/AR2005101500218.html>).

⁵¹ Batchelder, H. (August 6, 2006). Do-Gooder Games. *Time*. (Retrieved August 13, 2007 from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1223388,00.html>).

⁵² (<http://www.darfurisdying.com/>).

⁵³ (<http://www.peacemakergame.com/blog/>).

⁵⁴ (aforcemorepowerful.org).

political and human rights for minorities and women. The game models real-world experience, allowing players to devise strategies, apply tactics and see the results.”

Ayiti: named after the way Haiti is pronounced in Creole, this student-designed game allows players to become involved in the problems of poverty by having to look after a family of five in Haiti. It is available for download⁵⁵.

Pax Warrior: “A gamer playing the role of a U.N. commander during the Rwandan genocide is confronted with grim trade-offs, such as choosing whether to fax the U.N. or save the Prime Minister”.

Simulation of an impossible situation

September 12th: As with Pax warrior some simulations offer grim views of world events. A Stanford professor (Anonymous, 19 April, 2004) reported concerns about September 12th⁵⁶ raised by his teaching assistant.

In this game players try to kill terrorists. But as you shoot the terrorists, both terrorists and civilians die. The nearby civilians grieve at their losses and then turn into terrorists, like a plague that spreads out of control. You soon realize there’s no way to win.

In showing that violent responses to terrorism are likely to produce more terrorists and more violence *September 12* could be said to be implicitly endorsing alternative solutions. However, the game contains no explicit teaching or demonstration of alternative conflict resolution strategies and is unlikely to give players any sense that their actions will improve the situation.

PeaceMaker is a simulation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Promoted as “a video game to promote peace” this game is potentially the most interesting of the games mentioned to those who wish to use games to help people solve conflicts. In

⁵⁵ thecostoflife.org.

⁵⁶ September 12th (<http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm>).

PeaceMaker players aim to achieve a stable resolution to the conflict to win a Nobel Prize. Players look at both sides of the issue, taking on the role of either the Israeli or the Palestinian Prime Minister and react to diplomatic negotiations, military attacks or suicide bombs. News footage and images make the game more realistic. Eight internal and external “actors” representing Hamas, the public, the U.S., the United Nations or the Arab world are affected by player decisions and react to them⁵⁷.

Blog reactions to the game summarise both its advantages and its drawbacks. “One advantage is that in the game it’s possible to solve such a long standing problem even in 20 minutes”⁵⁸. This advantage is also a disadvantage as bloggers warn that thinking you can solve the Arab/Israeli problem in a game is in itself a problem given that it is such a longstanding and complex real life problem which despite extensive efforts remains unsolved.

Discussion and conclusion

Violence and attitudes towards violence have the potential to affect the way we live in our communities and the ethos and values of our society itself. Thus it seems we have collective responsibility to teach non-violence and to avoid promoting violence. Individuals may argue that any regulation of video game content beyond warnings about the kind of violence involved is a restriction on their freedom and that what children play and watch is a parental responsibility. However, despite the warnings of psychologists, increasing numbers of games involving high levels of violence, albeit not designed for children, are available in homes throughout the world.

In 2007 the *Brisbane Times* reported the release of videogame Halo 3 with the headline , “Online bloodbath as half a billion killed”

⁵⁷ (Retrieved August 20, 2007 from <http://www.peacemakergame.com/>).

⁵⁸ (Retrieved August 14, 2008 from <http://www.peacemakergame.com/blog/2007/02/14/i-made-peace/>).

It has been a bloody last few days in the online world with more than half a billion players slaughtered following the release of the most pre-ordered game in history, Halo 3. Over the past 24 hours, 1,441,353 people have played Halo 3 on its American staging server Bungie. Since its release on September 25, the game has racked up a staggering 592,768,583 deaths. Halo has already set a record for the highest opening day sales of any video game or movie pushing \$US170 million into the pockets of creator Microsoft⁵⁹

Players, whether young or old, learn aggressive scripts through participating in excessive amounts of killing. Claims that Halo 3 is an adult game and not designed for children fail to acknowledge that children imitate the behaviour and attitudes of those they live with and that once a game is purchased no one knows who plays it. Despite frequent warnings by psychologists of the potential effect of violent games on attitudes towards violence news reports about Halo3 focussed on the profits to Microsoft rather than caution about the effects of simulated violence.

Reviewing the game New York Times writer Herold (2007) reinforced the centrality of the violence

the story of Halo 3 is the same as that of Halo 2 and the original Halo: a lot of things get in your way and you kill them. The game's pleasures lie in the things you kill and how you do it. Enemies are engagingly varied, ranging from small, easily frightened creatures that will shriek and run away if things start going badly, to monstrous walking tanks. Weapons include shotguns, sniper rifles, flame throwers and a giant sledgehammer that slices most monsters in half with a single blow⁶⁰.

⁵⁹ Casey, S. (September 27, 2007). Online bloodbath as half a billion killed. Brisbane Times (Retrieved September 27, 2007

<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/articles/2007/09/27/1190486452397.html>)

⁶⁰ Herold, C. (27 September, 2007). Halo 3 Mimics Halo 2, With Some Improved Graphics. New York Times (Retrieved September 28, 2007 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/27/technology/circuits/27games.html>) ¶ 8.

Have we come to accept video game violence as normal? Herold is aware that violence and excitement create demand. “Halo 3 is not just a game: it is a phenomenon fueled by obsessed fans, slick advertising and excessive press coverage”⁶¹. Such games are products that are creating a culture which glorifies automatic, aggressive and violent reactions to challenge. Attempts to create a different sort of culture by developing games teaching more considered ways of reacting do not offer as much excitement, such sensation and such shared camaraderie in the killing frenzy. Neither are such games promoted so excessively nor produced with such lavish and expensive production values as to offer a challenge to the profits or the influence of the makers of games like Halo 3.

Goldstein⁶² pointed out that attitudes towards media portrayal of violence are part of the culture in which people are embedded and which their own actions and choices in part helped create. Anderson and Bushman⁶³ suggested that what we know of the effects of portrayals of violence should cause us to create new ways of entertaining that would be potentially less harmful. In the UNESCO global study on media violence Groebel⁶⁴ concluded that despite the overwhelming importance of social and economic conditions in which children grow up the media are still important “constituents of cultures, beliefs and orientations”. UNESCO recommended three strategies which nearly a decade later seem doubly urgent

- Public debate and “common ground” talks between politicians, producers, and teachers
- The development of professional codes of conduct and self-discipline for producers

⁶¹ Herold, n 65 at ¶ 20.

⁶² Goldstein, n 11.

⁶³ Anderson and Bushman, n 1.

⁶⁴ Goebel, n 25

- Innovative forms of media education to create competent and critical media users⁶⁵

We could add that violent aggressive reactions to conflict need to be replaced by collaborative cooperative problem solving if the people of the world are to live in peace in their families, their cities and towns, and in the larger world. As media is an influential part of cultural learning it is in all our interests to be aware of what video games teach our children and young adults about solving conflict.

⁶⁵ Goebel, n 25 at 13.